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ABSTRACT

Using cooperative learning techniques in writing classes requires the instructor to plan carefully and respond spontaneously to the assignment as students work through it. Steps using the techniques successfully include: (1) developing academic objectives for each step in the writing process (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, and proofreading and editing) and cooperative objectives to help students work effectively with each other (e.g., using first names, and being positive and encouraging); (2) organizing heterogeneous groups with respect to age, race, and sex--arranging the room to facilitate group work--creating positive interdependence--assigning student jobs (i.e., facilitator, counter, recorder, and checker)--and ensuring individual accountability; (3) monitoring the groups' work to identify problems they are having in completing the assignment and working cooperatively; (4) intervening as necessary to change the direction a group has taken in completing an assignment; and (5) evaluating group and individual work in accordance with pre-determined and previously explained standards. Sample group assignments and a group work evaluation sheet are attached. (JMC)

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Strategies for Success:

Cooperative Learning Groups in Writing Classes

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Strategies for Success:
Cooperative Learning Groups in Writing Classes

Introduction

My first experience designing group activities in writing classes was with "peer editing groups." This first group assignment was a disaster, and I was very suspicious for awhile of claims that group work is superior to other types of student learning. However, because I felt the need to vary my teaching methodology for my developmental writing students, I began to research student group work and discovered a wealth of helpful information about structuring groups for elementary students. My investigation showed me that cooperative learning is much more than merely putting students into groups; this technique requires an instructor to plan very carefully and respond spontaneously to the assignment as the students work through it. After adapting this information to my adult learners and to writing objectives for the courses I teach, I have developed a system of cooperative group activities to help my students learn the process of writing and, thereby, to improve their writing skills.

My objectives in this presentation are to help you understand the basic principles for structuring cooperative learning groups for college students and to show you specifically what my assignments look like. I also hope to answer some of the concerns and misgivings you may have about cooperative learning

groups.

Rationale for Cooperative Groups in a Writing Classroom

The primary reason I have my students work in cooperative learning groups is that this strategy allows my students to learn to write better faster. Second, my developmental students generally enjoy working in groups much more than working individually. Their enjoyment of group activities usually leads them to a greater enjoyment of writing. Third, while working in groups, students learn to write inductively, using other students' work as examples of ways to proceed with their own assignments. In addition, students learn people skills necessary in the work place and ways to respond to real-life writing situations that students are likely to encounter on the job. Finally, group work naturally accommodates writing pedagogy because writing is communicative.

Five Steps to Cooperative Learning in Writing Classrooms

The steps to creating successful cooperative learning are (1) developing objectives, both academic and cooperative, (2) organizing the groups, (3) monitoring the groups' work (4) intervening in the groups' work as necessary (5) setting up a system for evaluating group work.

Step 1: Developing Academic Objectives

The academic objectives I designed are organized by the stages in the writing process: (1) prewriting, (2) drafting, (3) revising, and (4) proofreading and editing. Some specific

objectives for the prewriting stage include learning and practicing a variety of prewriting techniques and assessing and choosing prewriting ideas. Objectives for students working in groups at the drafting stage include organizing ideas, creating a focus, and writing the first draft. The revising stage provides the most potential for improving students' writing skills. At this stage, students' objectives are to rewrite unclear sentences, anticipate and write for readers' expectations, rewrite to provide points or arguments that are more convincing, rewrite to include more examples and specific details, and rewrite to correct problems with unity. At the proofreading and editing stage, students' objectives are to learn and practice strategies for proofreading and editing, to help each other correct technical mistakes by applying grammar and mechanics rules studied in class, and to become aware of grammar and mechanics areas that group members need to study and review further.

Cooperative Objectives

To ensure that students in a group are able to work effectively with each other, I also assign a cooperative objective (a people skill) for the students to practice while they complete the academic objective for a particular group meeting. Some basic, easy to measure, cooperative objectives include using others' first names, being positive and encouraging, focusing attention on the immediate group only, and

making sure everyone participates. These four skills are necessary in order to create trust and a positive working environment. I assign the four basic cooperative objectives at the beginning of the semester.

Once students are aware of and have practiced these four basic objectives, I assign advanced cooperative objectives, which are necessary for students' writing skills to improve. The advanced cooperative objectives include seeking elaboration of ideas in a piece of writing, demanding vocalization of other members' reasoning processes, criticizing a piece of writing without criticizing the writer, extending other members' examples or ideas, probing by asking questions that lead to deeper analysis, and generating further ideas for development. In groups that quickly establish a positive working environment, the students often begin using these advanced skills before I actually assign them.

Many instructors (including me) have had serious reservations about requiring their students to work on cooperative objectives. Assigning cooperative objectives (people skills) seems to waste valuable academic time and seems to be far beneath the level of college work. Though these seem to be strong reasons for not teaching cooperative skills, not teaching these skills was the primary mistake I made several years ago when I first had my students work in peer editing groups. Students in those failed peer editing groups had not established the working relationship necessary to effectively help improve

each other's writing. Since that time, I have observed that students with strong people skills generally learn better and faster than the others and enjoy what they are learning. In addition, people skills can be applied to any life situation and, thus, give the student the opportunity to grow as a person, not just as a writer. Interestingly, few of my developmental students have strong people skills when they begin my class. These three points provide justification for and demonstrate the absolute necessity of requiring students to work on cooperative objectives. Group work without cooperative objectives simply does not provide an effective learning environment.

Techniques to Accomplish Academic and Cooperative Objectives

A technique that I rely on heavily for teaching both academic and cooperative objectives is modeling. Before my students begin their group work, I go through their assignment using a student's paragraph or essay on the overhead projector, explaining, as I work, which objectives I am demonstrating. Once students begin working in their groups, I model the objectives and skills as necessary to clarify their assignment.

The second technique that I use to ensure that my students are accomplishing both the academic and cooperative objectives is to structure their assignments carefully to include both aspects of the assignment and to help the students break the assignment down into tasks that individual members take responsibility for. This technique will be described in the following sections.

Examples of the student assignment sheets included at the end of this presentation demonstrate my method of structuring cooperative group work.

Step 2: Grouping

In order for cooperative learning groups to be effective, each group's composition should be heterogeneous with respect to age, race, and sex. To prepare for the first group meeting, I randomly assign group members, then check the lists of members for heterogeneity and make the necessary reassignments. I have the students begin their group work during the second week of the semester, after I have had a chance to learn their names, and before they have had a chance to develop strong biases about other students in the class. I explain to the students that they will be working for most of the semester with the same group members. The actual group composition changes through the semester as the class composition changes because of students dropping or changing their schedule. When a group loses too many members for it to function, I merge these group members into other groups or create a new group by combining the members of various small groups. The groups in my classes consist of two to four members. Three group members seems an ideal number in my developmental writing classes. In some cases, groups composed of just two members have difficulty functioning effectively, especially if the students' writing and people skills are very weak. Similarly, having over four group members makes it

difficult for groups to function efficiently. Generally, the more members a group has, the easier it is for individuals to fail to participate effectively or to break into sub-groups. Functioning effectively within a large group requires individuals to have strong people skills.

Room Arrangement

When students work in groups, it is important for them to be arranged in a manner that facilitates their group efforts. Group members should sit facing each other so they may make easy eye contact. In addition, the instructor should have easy access to each group. Finally, groups should meet in specific, assigned areas of the classroom each time, and groups should be located as far away from other groups as possible.

Creating Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence in my classes refers to students working as a team to help each other learn to write better. Positive interdependence is a feature vital to creating a structure for learning in groups. The first way I create positive interdependence is by dividing the task into jobs so that everyone has to help to complete the task. I also have my students exchange paragraphs or essays and answer a series of questions about their group members' work. A variation of this strategy is to have the students decide which group member is good at answering particular questions and have each group member

specialize by making comments on particular revision questions for every paragraph or essay in the group.

Student Jobs

To structure positive interdependence into my students' group assignments, the students in the group must assign jobs: facilitator, counter, recorder, and checker. The facilitator makes sure the group members understand the assignment and gets the group organized and started on the assignment. The facilitator is a required job in groups composed of three or four members. The counter is a required job, regardless of the size of a group. The counter is in charge of observing and counting the way a group demonstrates fulfilling a cooperative objective. For example, on some assignments, the counter might count and record the number of times each group member uses another group member's name. Tracking this information makes it easy for the group to evaluate how well they have carried out the cooperative objective. Like the counter, the recorder is also a required job, regardless of the size of a group. The recorder's function is to preside over filling out the group evaluation form, the assignment sheet, or any other record of the group's work on that particular assignment. The checker is a job required only for groups of four students. In four-member groups, it is the checker's job to make sure the group members understand the assignment and the academic objective to be refined on a given assignment. The checker is responsible for determining whether

anyone in the group can answer a question that arises or if it is necessary to ask the instructor for clarification. In groups without a checker, it is easiest for the facilitator to assume these responsibilities. In groups of two, the evaluation at the end of the group meeting functions as the opportunity for an assessment of what the students have learned and understood. In small classes, the instructor may function as the checker during the group work assignment.

At the beginning of the semester, I assign jobs to individuals within a group in order to get the group assignments off to a solid start. As the semester proceeds, I encourage the students to shift jobs from assignment to assignment so no one is forced to do a distasteful job for long. From time to time during the semester, I assign particular jobs within groups whose members seem to have special difficulty functioning effectively. For example, giving a group member who tends to withdraw from active participation a key job for a particular assignment often encourages the student to participate more actively.

Ensuring Individual Accountability

Individual accountability refers to students being required to answer to the group and to the teacher for their work. Individual accountability ensures that all students within a group participate equally and effectively in the group assignment. One reservation I have had about group work was the tendency in some group projects for one person to do more or less

than his or her share of the work. Structuring cooperative group work to include individual accountability makes each group member responsible for completing an equal share of the group's work.

To ensure individual accountability in my students' work, I require each member to prepare a portion of the assignment before the group meeting. The jobs I assign to each student within a group also create individual accountability. When necessary in order to get the students to take the assignment seriously, I choose one assignment at random, from each group, for the group's grade. In this way, each individual's efforts has an equal potential of affecting everyone's grades within the group. In situations in which students seem to have extreme difficulty participating effectively, I assign the lowest individual score from a group as the group's grade. My usual strategy, however, is to give a group grade separate from the assignment grade. This grading technique allows students to be rewarded in a more positive way for individual contributions to the group's efforts. The group grade is based on both academic and cooperative objectives. One final way to provide a positive reward for strong group effort is to give students bonus points if all groups members do well individually.

Step 3: Monitoring

The third step to cooperative learning, monitoring, allows for the observation of the groups' activities while in the process of completing the assignment. Monitoring gives the

instructor a chance to observe group members to see what problems they are having in completing the assignment and working cooperatively. The student assigned the job of counter assists the instructor in the monitoring step because this student observes people skills and keeps track of the number of times a particular one is used. As monitoring is being carried out, the instructor is able to keep notes on specific student behavior and on specific writing problems.

While monitoring, I give immediate feedback and reinforcement for writing objectives that are being mastered. I encourage oral elaboration and explanation, reteach as necessary and add to teaching as the students bring up questions about points not yet covered in class. As I mentioned earlier, I model both academic and cooperative behaviors for individual groups and I am able to determine which academic and cooperative objectives to work on next. Perhaps the greatest advantage to the monitoring step, though, is that I get to know my students better. Creating a personal connection with my students makes me a more effective teacher and usually makes the students more active and interested in the class.

Step 4: Intervening

Intervention, the fourth step to cooperative learning, allows an instructor to step in and change the direction a particular group has taken in completing an assignment. Intervention goes beyond monitoring in that an instructor has the

opportunity to temporarily become part of a group that is displaying difficulty in completing the assignment. Depending on the problem I encounter within a group, I intervene by teaching writing skills like revising and editing or by clarifying the assignment. At times, I serve as a consultant to help a group make writer's decisions about organizing or phrasing ideas. I also teach necessary cooperative skills and make suggestions for more effective ways to do the assignment.

Step 5: Evaluating

The last step to cooperative learning is evaluating. To make sure that the evaluating step contributes in a positive way to cooperative group work, students need to be evaluated in accordance with pre-determined (and previously explained) standards. For example, I tell my students which areas their paragraphs will be graded on and have the groups check those areas. I also tell the students at the beginning of their group activity what their cooperative objective (people skill) is and base part of their group grade on their performance of that objective.

In addition, students need to be evaluated both on mastery of academic concepts and on students' cooperative efforts. Grades for written assignments in my class are based on academic concepts, and grades for group work are based on cooperative efforts.

Both group and individual performance need to be evaluated.

I assign a group grade based on students' cooperative efforts and individual grades for their completed writing assignments. These grades equally affect the students' grade for the course.

Feedback for both academic and cooperative objectives needs to be as immediate as possible. During group work, I am able to read students' writing assignments, so students get immediate feedback on their writing. Further, since I usually have a chance to read each student's work while in groups, when I collect the final copies of paragraph or essay assignments, my job of grading goes much faster and, thus, I can return their work to them faster. I also give feedback on group work as I move from group to group and write feedback on the students' group processing forms. Finally, I return the previous group assignment form with a grade and comments at the beginning of the next group activity.

Students need to evaluate how they and their group performed their various jobs for that day and indicate what they learned or what they need more help with. When the students participate in the evaluation, I get a picture of what the groups are doing when I am not directly monitoring them. Most importantly, the students are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning by increasing their awareness of the areas they need to work on and by explaining what they learned while completing a particular group assignment.

Sample Group Assignment and Evaluation Sheets

The assignment sheets that follow structure my students' cooperative group work. Depending on a class' writing assignment, each student gets a handout with the steps to follow for that group activity. At the end of the group work, each group gets an evaluation sheet to fill out. The recorder is responsible for overseeing the evaluation and returning the form to me; the students take their written work and assignment sheets with comments about their assignments and complete the writing assignment individually outside of class.

Sample Group Assignment #1

Peer Prewriting Ideas Checklist

Date:

Academic Objective: Choosing an Essay Topic from Prewriting Ideas

Cooperative Objective (people skill): Use each other's first names at least three times per person

Author of Essay: Reader(s):

General Directions: Carefully read over your group member's prewriting ideas before answering the following questions.

1. What is the main idea (focus) of the prewriting?

2. What would you like to know about this main idea? What are the questions that come into your mind about his topic?

   A.

   B.

   C.

3. On your group member's prewriting sheet, put a + next to the prewriting ideas that answer some of your question's about this topic.

4. Look back over you questions (#2). Which questions are unanswered by the ideas in your group member's prewriting?

   What kind of information do you think would best answer these unanswered questions?

5. What point or opinion about the topic do you see in your group member's prewriting?

Sample Cooperative Group Assignment #2

Revising Definition Paragraphs

Academic Objective: Revise and proofread definition paragraphs.

Cooperative Objective: Ask group members to explain any unclear points to their definitions and help think up examples to improve definitions.

Jobs:
Counter--Counts number of times each person asks a group member for an explanation or provides an example for improving a paragraph.

Facilitator--Makes sure everyone exchanges paragraphs efficiently and completes the assignment.

Recorder--Fills out the group evaluation sheet and returns it to instructor.

Checker--Makes sure everyone in the group understands the structure of a definition paragraph.

Directions: Exchange paragraphs with group members and answer the following questions about your group member's paragraph.

Questions for Revision:

1. What is being defined in the paragraph?

2. What is the definition for the idea being defined?

3. What examples are used to support the definition?

4. Do you think there are enough examples to support the definition? Are there any examples that do not support the definition?

5. What sentences need to be cleared up so they are easier to understand?

Questions for Proofreading:

1. Are there any problems with sentence structure?

2. Are there any problems with comma usage?

3. Are there any problems with apostrophes?

4. Are there any errors in subject-verb agreement?

Sample Cooperative Group Assignment #3

Peer Editing and Proofreading Checklist

Date:

Academic Objective: Learn to proofread and edit an essay.

Cooperative Objective: Focus attention on your group only.

Author of Essay: Reader(s):

1. Reading over the essay backwards, from the last sentence to the first, focus on subjects and verbs to identify whether the essay has any run-on sentences or sentence fragments. On your group member's essay, put a dot in the margin next to the line where a sentence structure problem is found.

2. Read over the essay from beginning to end and identify sentences that are hard to understand. On your group member's essay, mark parts that are hard to understand with a ?.

3. Check for correct comma usage. Are additional commas necessary? Do you detect any unnecessary commas? Put a * where you think a comma should be deleted or added.

4. Check for correct apostrophe usage and possessives. Are additional apostrophes needed? Are any apostrophes misused? Put a ^ where you think apostrophes are needed or misused.

Group Work Evaluation Sheet

(This form is completed at the end of every group assignment.)

Date:

Group Members Present Today:

Academic Objective:

Cooperative Objective:

Jobs:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Evaluation:
Each group member should give a report of the group's work and progress as well as a report of the job he or she did.

Facilitator:

Counter:

Checker:

Recorder:

Today we learned:

We need more help with:

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